

Thoughts & Tactics for Practice Group SEO

Steve Matthews | September 2010

We're used to thinking about search engine optimization (SEO) as a tool for law firms' general web presence. But a growing opportunity, still under many firms' radar, lies with a slightly different approach: practice group SEO, tailoring SEO tactics for specific practice areas within the firm. In many respects, practice focused SEO has the potential to be substantially more effective than the firm's larger SEO strategy, which is often (necessarily) broad and less aligned with the services provided.

Let's look at an example of how practice groups typically use search engines to improve business development. A patent law practice group, for instance, would start by selecting a phrase representative of one element of the group's services -- say, "*patent licensing Canada*." The first step is to identify how often people type this phrase into Google each month; for illustration purposes, we'll make it 3,000, or 36,000 annually. The practice group could respond to this information by positioning an on-subject paper, service page, or website at the top of the Google search results. Over the course of a single year, those 36,000 searches represent a consistently strong opportunity to showcase that group's expertise.

Repeat this scenario for any portfolio of related phrases, and a practice group will boost its exposure in front of its desired audience. Consequently, the group's members will also improve the number of qualified contacts they receive and increase their ability to generate new relationships and potential work.

There are some specific techniques that law firms can employ to improve their "practice group findability" on the web. Here are some recommendations:

1. Conduct keyword research on niche service areas. It's important to know the number of monthly searches conducted for a specific area of practice. With a strong grasp of the terms and phrases people use, groups can determine some key strategic information:

(a) whether *there's demand for a subject online*: confirm if a "hot topic" really is popular, or if a casual industry phrase is worth more focused attention.

(b) *preferred phrases*: which phrases are used most commonly? Are you using language that's too sophisticated, or not sophisticated enough?

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(c) *preferred keyword order*: Search engines deliver different results based on the word order of your search. Knowing these variations can change your approach; see the next entry on selecting titles.

2. Select the best titles for publications. Choose titles for group articles and papers based on the results of your keyword research, directing attention to both volume (frequently searched) phrases and keyword order. And remember to be descriptive: practice groups that choose descriptive titles have an opportunity to be found.

3. Set up microsites for practice groups. Examples include blogs, FAQ collections, and single-subject websites. By selecting a domain name that matches a high-volume search, a website can be more subject-focused, and consequently will perform strongly for that subject in the search engines.

4. Create a “deep link” strategy. Many websites (LinkedIn or Google Profiles, for example) allow you to link back to webpages on your site. Rather than sending these links to the firm homepage, practice group members should, whenever possible, point links to:

(a) their practice group web page, or

(b) their personal lawyer profile page.

5. Create Service Pages. These are sub-pages to the practice group homepage. The group would identify niche service areas and create dedicated webpages (or from an SEO perspective, “landing pages”) for that service offering. These pages expose more depth about the group's expertise and create more opportunity for search traffic. These pages are optimized for their subject, and can deliver targeted page titles based on keyword research.

6. Conduct new article and publication outreach. When your practice group releases a paper, video, article, or any publication, to whom can you send it? Remember that incoming links are “votes” in Google for higher search-engine rankings. Practice groups should spend some time identifying *who they know online*: bloggers, industry writers, media, or anyone who can help expose content publishing by the group.

7. Use keywords (authentically) in the body text. Once you know the high-volume search phrases, you must use those phrases within the text you write. This shouldn't be done in an excessive manner, but do consider using using target phrases once or twice within the body of your writing.

8. Place subheadings on practice pages. Breaking up larger text blocks is a natural writing technique online anyway, so if you're adding section headers, consider aligning those headers with your volume phrase targets.

These techniques, when used consistently within and across practice groups, should generate the right kind of site traffic and yield measurably improved business development results.

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